

joanne findon, *A Woman's Words: Emer and Female Speech in the Ulster Cycle*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997. Pp. xiii, 211. isbn: 0-8020-0865-8. \$35.

If gender, as the postmodernists tell us, resides in performance, then this book—which usefully investigates a topic not previously, to my knowledge, covered comprehensively in studies of the Old Irish Sagas—opens a comparatively unexplored window into a body of work which has been seen as among the most male-dominant not just of Indo-European but of all world literatures. Frank O'Connor even posited, many years ago, an epic misogynistic poem as a source for the central saga of the Ulster Cycle—the *Táin bo Cúlaigine*, or *Cattle Raid of Cooley*—which provides the subject and context for Findon's study (and demonstrates, incidentally, that the twentieth-century conflict between Ulster and the rest of Ireland has roots so ancient they are recorded here, in this earliest of all European vernaculars). Findon early on notes another problem presented by these ancient stories, that all the 'surviving [Old Irish] literature was written down by scribes educated in monasteries after the coming of Christianity' (13). Whatever the original, native and Celtic woman-hatred postulated by O'Connor and others, 'the censure of women's speech in particular situates these works firmly within the larger misogynistic discourse of medieval Europe' (14).

How remarkable, then, that Findon should find in her central exemplar, Emer, the eventual wife of the greatest of Ulster heroes, Cú Chulainn, an eloquent if not always persuasive female voice in favor of the heroic code but not at the expense of law or (in a different sense than our contemporary use of the term) family values. No first-time reader of the *Táin* and its *rhemscala*, or surrounding tales, remains unmoved by the most famous of her speeches, in which she attempts (unfortunately without success) to dissuade her husband from slaying his only son, Connla, in order to amend the shame of his foster brother Conall Cernach's defeat by the marvelous boy and the subsequent refusal of the other Ulster warriors to fight him. But this 'fierce and desperate speech' (85) is, as Findon demonstrates, only the centerpiece of a series of utterances which mark Emer's movement from a supporter to a sometime opposer not only of her society's customs and attitudes but even of her own husband's actions when her conscience finds them wrong.

Findon moves more or less chronologically from the tale of courtship by Cú Chulainn in *Tochmarc Emire* (*The Wooing of Emer*) where, in contrast to the several other similar Irish tales, 'her speech actually shapes the narrative itself' (36); to *Fled Bricreind* (*Bricriu's Feast*) where she 'pushes at the boundaries of acceptable speech...to enhance her own honour and that of her husband' (83); to the *Aided Oenfir Aife* (*The Death of Aife's Only Son*) where her courageous words and actions allow her to speak for the two warrior women Aife, Connla's mother, and Scáthach, her husband's martial arts teacher, as well as all mothers; to the *Serlige Con Culain* (*The Wasting Sickness of Cú Chulainn*), an unusual narrative for Irish heroic literature, focused on women's voicing of their rather than men's desires, where nevertheless a (male) druidic potion must restore order (and indicate limits of womanly speech/action in a masculine milieu). A cultural critic, the author offers literary, legal and other appropriate contexts for each of these tales, weaving the whole together to exhibit the 'complex and compelling figure' of Emer, who—as she rightly

asserts—deserves a place with other ‘memorable’ medieval literary women (139). A full introduction, a useful source and manuscript appendix, and very full notes also help to make this an original, interesting and useful book.

What I miss, however, is a fuller treatment of the other, more talked-about (as good wives do not let themselves be) females in the *Táin*, whose reputations stand so counter to Emer’s—that is, of Medb, Otherworldly Queen of the Connaught who with her husband Ailill is Ulster’s and Cú Chulainn’s chief opponent; her daughter, Findabair, who dies from shame (she is later revived but then turned by Cú into a pillar of stone) not from having had her favors promised by her parents to so many heroes but from the futile deaths of those heroes in the battle over possession of her charms; and The Morríghan, the Irish war goddess who tempts Cú Chulainn in the battle against the rest of Ireland, a battle he is the only Ulster hero capable of waging, and who, when spurned, ends by slaying him (but whom Findon does not even mention). The vitriol hurled at these females, and in particularly scurrilous form at Medb, is a striking contrast to the general tolerance accorded Emer, and an enquiry into that contrast (one facet of which would certainly be that these others are not Ulsterwomen) would have been profitable. But this is a minor quibble in any assessment of this fine book, which for Arthurians also offers a window into characters later reborn as Guinevere (for whose name Findabair’s is cognate: both mean ‘White Shadow’ or perhaps ‘White Ghost’) and Gawain (for whom Cú Chulainn is an acknowledged original).

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